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ABSTRACT

The relationship between younger and older children's stated preferences for television characters and their conceptions of those characters was investigated among students in the second and fifth grades. Of particular interest was the possible effect of children's preferences on the developmental shift from external to internal attributes. Using sets of photographs in a sorting task, 20 girls and 20 boys from two age groups (a total of 80 subjects) chose a preferred, nonpreferred, and neutral character from each of two frequently watched situation comedies. Next, the children responded to multiple-choice scene dilemma tasks, designed as story contexts into which the children could "project" their evaluation of six characters. Subjects were then asked to describe the characters as completely as possible, to state each character's most important attribute, and to explain why they did or did not "want to trade places" with the character. Data from these free descriptions were examined for length and were coded for evaluation (positive, neutral, negative) and for both content and depth of description (surface, active, internal) according to a category and subcategory system. Another 40 children, forming a roughly equivalent "baseline" group, provided data for correction score calculations on the dilemma task. Results are discussed. (Author/RH)

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HEROES, HUMBUGS, AND ALSO-RANS: CHILDREN'S PREFERENCES AND EVALUATIONS CONCERNING TELEVISION CHARACTERS

Technical Report #25

by

Shari Robinson, David Fernie, and Laurene Meringoff

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Abstract

Second and fifth graders' understanding and evaluation of familiar television characters was examined for the effect the children's preferences would have on their observations. We reasoned that the nature and degree of children's affective involvements would color their interpretations and knowledge of these potentially powerful role models.

Using sets of photographs in a sorting task, 20 girls and 20 boys from two age groups chose a preferred, nonpreferred, and neutral character from each of two frequently watched situation comedies. Next, the children responded to multiple choice scene dilemma tasks, designed as story contexts into which the children could "project" their evaluation of six characters. They were then asked to describe the characters as completely as possible; to state each character's most important attribute; and to explain why they did or did not "want to trade places" with the character. These free description data were examined for length, and were coded for evaluation (positive, neutral, negative) and for both content and depth of description (surface, active, internal), using a category and subcategory system.

The results of the scene dilemma task reveal a significant tendency for the fifth graders to interpret the characters' actions more positively than the second graders ($F = 9.084$, $p = .053$). For both age groups, the least preferred characters tended to be evaluated more negatively in the scene contexts than the positive or neutral characters ($F = 2.006$, $p = .053$). The free descriptions revealed an overall pattern of neutrality for both age groups, with the positive outnumbering the negative in the few remaining comments.

The children's differential uses of the descriptive categories confirmed developmental and sex-typed patterns reported by other researchers

(e.g., Fernie, 1981; Robinson, Jaglom, & Wilder, 1980; Wartella and Alexander, 1979). Older children generally offered more internal attributes; younger boys paid closer attention to actions; and younger girls focused on surface descriptions and personality traits.

An analysis of the free description data for the eight most frequently chosen characters reveals a complex interaction between the character's preferred status (e.g., positive, negative), the child's age and sex, and the nature of the character's role within the show. In general, the children's comments about the preferred (same-sex) and non-preferred (opposite sex) characters showed the expected developmental increase in the use of inferred traits. However, when the children commented on the neutral characters, second and fifth graders tended to use the same proportion of internal attributes. A similar adevelopmental pattern occurs in response to non-preferred characters who were both older and the same sex as the respondents.

Introduction

Background

Children look to a number of sources for information about desirable social attributes. Parents, siblings, teachers, and peers may, as familiar and valued persons, influence children's standards of appearance, behavior, and personality development. Likewise, characters on television provide children with a great deal of social information. Moreover, regular exposure to a weekly series may result in the development of special relationships between children and the shows' central characters. While it is important to understand the developmental course of children's person perceptions from both behavioral and social cognitive perspectives, affective involvement, whether termed identification, hero worship, or simply character preference, may also mediate children's perceptions and understanding of television characters. What children learn from televised role models may, in turn, expand or limit their vision of both their own development and that of others.

While children's conceptions of filmed and televised characters have been studied for years, few researchers have taken into consideration children's feelings or the degree of their interest in specific characters. This factor may be especially relevant for the television medium, where the fan can view his or her preferred characters on a regular basis.

In a study which used novel film stimuli, Maccoby and Wilson (1959) studied seventh graders' differential descriptions of filmed characters with whom they had identified for reasons of perceived similarity (e.g., age, sex, socioeconomic status). The children were more likely to remember the attributes and behaviors of characters they felt were like themselves or like the kinds of people they aspired to be. More recently, Leifer, Collins, Gross, Taylor, Andrews, and Blackmer (1971) tested the hypothesis that all children would more easily infer

the motivations and feelings of same sex characters, such knowledge presumably being facilitated by sex-role identification. However, Leifer, et al. did not find support for this hypothesis. Instead, they found that older children had a better understanding of characters' inner states than younger children did, results which parallel other research into developmental changes in children's character understanding (e.g., Flapan, 1968; Collins, Berndt, and Hess, 1974) and person perception (e.g., Livesley and Bromley, 1973). Leifer, et. al. attributed their findings to the fact that the 4-10 year old children were not as concerned with the appropriateness of sex-typed portrayals as were the 12 year-old children in the Maccoby and Wilson study. Moreover, the children's lack of familiarity with the filmed people may have limited their ability or inclination to attend to the characters' less obvious features.

In recent years, television researchers concerned with the validity of their media stimuli have used familiar shows and television people in the place of unfamiliar films and characters. One such investigator (Reeves, 1976), found that young children distinguish familiar television characters on the basis of physical characteristics while older children focused on their behaviors. In later work (Reeves and Greenberg, 1977; Reeves and Lometti, 1979), Reeves and colleagues used a multidimensional scaling technique in which they asked children to compare characters on a limited set of dimensions rather than allow the respondents to describe the characters in an open-ended manner. Reeves and colleagues found no real differences between third and eighth graders' conceptions of television people, and concluded that older children recognize that stereotyped television portrayals require only the simplest of evaluations. Children thus do not look for complex attributes in this created entertainment, although they are cognitively capable of doing so, as shown by person

perception studies (e.g., Peevers and Secord, 1973).

Recent reviews of Reeves' work have contended that it was the multidimensional scaling methodology rather than any limitations inherent in television characters that inhibited the range of the children's responses (Fernie, 1981, Isler, 1981). Wartella and Alexander (1977) asked children to choose from a list of characters and to describe them at length. As in the person perception literature, older children used more internal descriptors and inferences about behavior than younger children did. Perhaps the ability to discuss the characters of their choice resulted in the children describing those with whom they were most familiar and/or with whom they had identified. Unfortunately, the study provides no data about the children's involvement with these characters. Therefore, we cannot know the influence their feelings might have had on the amount or type of knowledge the children had acquired.

Purpose

In the present study, we examine the relationship between children's stated preferences for television people and their conceptions of these characters. Of particular interest is the possible effect of these preferences on the developmental shift in children's focus from external to internal attributes. Can strong positive or negative affect lead children to make inferences about characters at an earlier age than would be expected? Do children's preferences result in the acquisition of a greater amount of knowledge about certain characters? Will children's positive or negative affect skew their evaluations and influence the depth of character understanding? What effect, if any, does indifference to characters have on the amount and type of comments children make? And could this "neutrality" be a factor in past research findings (e.g., Reeves, 1979) which showed no developmental differences in children's free descriptions of television characters?

The Role of Mental Effort

Recently, Salomon (1981) has introduced the concept of AIME -- Amount of Invested Mental Effort -- to explain how learning from television varies among individuals according to the perceived demands of the task. If one sees television as an "easy" medium, one is less inclined to invest mental effort, and will therefore learn less from the medium. Perhaps there are particular characters, who, because of their simple or stereotyped natures, require little of the viewer's mental effort to be understood. This line of reasoning would be consistent with Reeves' argument that older children perceive certain television characters as being two-dimensional and therefore worthy of only the simplest explanations. Whether television characters are limited or not, another important factor is the child's level of interest or involvement. It is possible that a less-complicated character might elicit greater AIME, and thus learning, than a complex television person for whom the child feels dislike or indifference.

In the light of Salomon's formulation, we predict that children's level of involvement with television characters will be associated with the amount and depth of infromation they provide in an open-ended interview. In other words, both viewer involvement and the complexity of television characters may interact to determine children's views of these people. This involvement may prove strong enough to produce counter-developmental trends in young children's abilities to discern internal descriptors. Likewise, a lack of involvement may mask older children's cognitive facility with character inferences. More specifically, we expect the evaluative content of the children's descriptions to correspond with their stated preferences, and with their responses to the dilemma task. Finally, we are looking for sex differences in the depth of children's responses (surface, active, internal) as well as in any differential emphasis on social or character attributes.

Method

Subjects

80 second and fifth grade boys and girls (four groups of twenty) constituted the "experimental" group. The mean age was 7:9 for the younger children and 11:0 for the older children. Another 40 children provided data for the correction score calculations on the dilemma task. This "baseline" group consisted of 10 boys and 10 girls in each of two groups roughly equivalent in age to the experimental second and fifth grade sample. All of the children were from a predominantly white, lower-middle class town outside of Boston. The experimental group was interviewed at the children's elementary school in the spring term of the school year; the baseline group was seen at their summer day camp early the following summer.

Experimental Stimuli

Still photographs of the characters were taken from videotaped segments of the programs. These photos were uniformly mounted on 5" X 8" index cards and were used as stimuli in the tasks.

Brief vignettes or dilemmas representing hypothetical television episodes were written to meet two criteria:

1) that any of the television characters in the study appear plausible in the stories;

2) that the actor's actions be ambiguous enough to elicit positive, neutral, or negative interpretations depending upon the child's feelings about the character.

The eight stories that best fit the criteria were selected by the experimenters and a panel of five adults. An example of one of the dilemmas appears below:

> (Fonz) was playing cards all evening with the (guy) next door. (Fonz) decided to go home. The neighbor was unhappy because (he) wanted to play a while longer. From what you know about (Fonz), do you think (he) went home because (he) was:
>
> a) tired because it was late (neutral)
> b) careful not to worry (his) family (positive)
> c) bored by the neighbor's game (negative)

Procedure

The children were interviewed individually by same-sex experimenters. We told them we were interested in finding out what children thought about people they saw on television. The experimental group was shown the titles of four popular television shows (Happy Days, The Brady Bunch, Eight is Enough, Mork and Mindy). We questioned the children about their viewing habits to determine which two programs each child watched the most frequently. Character familiarity was confirmed by asking the children to identify five people from each show. The children were them asked to select the person they "would most like to trade places with; the person (they) would most like to be." We termed this the positive (or preferred) character. Next, they chose the person they would least like to trade places with: the negative (or non-preferred) character. From the remaining photographs, the second most preferred and the second least favorite were selected and set aside. The fifth and remaing television person served as the "neutral" character. We then incorporated the positive, neutral, and negative character choices into two tasks.

To gather free description data, we first asked the children to describe each character so that we would know "a lot" about the character and know what each one was "like as a person." When the children indicated that they had completed their comments, they were asked what the "most important thing (was) for someone else to know about the person." To obtain children's projections about the characters in dilemmas, each TV person was incorporated into one of the eight scenes described above. Finally, the children were asked to give reasons why they identified either positively or negatively with the characters. All of the children's comments were tape-recorded for later transcription and scoring.

Two of the stories to which the children responded featured hypothetical people instead of television characters (e.g., a thirteen year-old boy

named Billy). Each child in the experimental group described six television characters and two hypothetical people, thus responding to eight dilemmas. The forty baseline children answered questions about non-television people for all eight scenes. Members of the latter group were also invited to tell us the name of the television show they most liked to watch and who their favorite character was on that show.

Scoring

Dilemmas. The children's responses to the non-television dilemmas gauged the neutrality of the scenes independent of the television characters. We reasoned that neutrality would consist of a balance between positive and negative selections in the multiple choice task and/or a preponderance of neutral answers. Instead, there was a positive skew in all but one instance (Dilemma 5 for the fifth graders). Consequently, correction scores were computed in each grade level for each dilemma. For example, if the second graders' answers about hypothetical people in the third dilemma totalled 12 positive, 3 neutral, and 5 negative, the correction score for this story would be .35 [(positive - negative)/total - (12-5)/20]. Thus, the second graders who chose a positive response about a television character for the third dilemma, would receive a score of 1.0-.35 = .65. Converted scores were analyzed by character status and by age and sex of respondent.

Free descriptions. A system was developed to organize the children's descriptions of the characters into the following categories: 1) surface features and locators; 2) active qualities and behaviors; 3) internal traits and attributes. These three major categories possess more articulated subcategories as well (see Table I below). Certain of these subcategories reflect a greater emphasis on social relations and are marked with an asterisk (*). Once the descriptions were scored for content, they were assigned a positive, neutral, ar negative value. For example, "She's

the prettiest girl" was rated positive; "Mindy lives with Mork" was rated neutral; and "Howard is overprotective" was rated negative. Twenty-five percent of the data was scored by two judges. Interrater reliability for the parsing of the data, and the assigning of categories and evaluation scores was 94%, 83% and 92% respectively. The remaining data were scored by one judge.

Content Categories for Free Descriptions

I. SURFACE (A static description which serves to identify or locate the character.)

A. Physical description (e.g., size, features, clothing, gender, age)
Example: Marsha's the prettiest girl.
Example: Fonz wears heavy cologne.

B. Physical locator (e.g., possessions, living/working space, geographic location)
Example: Greg has his own room in the attic.
Example: Mork comes from Ork.

C. Functional locator (e.g., job, school, tv related role)
Example: Alice is the housekeeper.
Example: Chachi works at Fonzie's garage.

*D. Social locator (e.g., friends, family members, close relationships)
Example: Howard is the head of the family.
Example: Mindy lives with Mork.

II. ACTIVE (Reported behaviors and activities.)

A. Ongoing individual behaviors
Example: Alice always cleans the house.
Example: Sometimes Greg plays baseball.

*B. Ongoing social behaviors or activities
Example: Fonz always teases Joanie.
Example: Howard gives a lot of advice.

*C. Episodic behaviors or activities
Example: One time Marsha wanted the attic to herself and Greg had it before her 'cause his stuff was here and there and because Carol told her she can go up there, and he said Mike told him that he can have that place, the attic...

III. INTERNAL (Traits or states which result in behaviors or describe the character's orientation toward himself or herself and others)

A. Level of competency
Example: Mike knows a lot about buildings.
Example: Joanie's a good actress.

B. Preferences/aspirations
Example: Greg wants to have a car.
Example: Marsha wants to have her own room.

*C. Social values
Example: Alice has lots of facts about things that tell you right from wrong.
Example: Joanie won't do things she's not supposed to except for a very important reason.

*D. Personality traits and social competencies
Example: Howard is overprotective.
Example: Fonz is cool.

*E. Thoughts and feelings about others
Example: Marsha thinks boys are the most important thing.
Example: Mindy doesn't want Mork to leave.

*F. Social function vis-a-vis others on the show
Example: Mike tries to help the kids out when they have problems.
Example: Alice always wants to know things about the kids.

*Denotes social attribute

Data Analysis

Dilemmas: Three-way ANOVAs (age x sex x preferred status of character) were performed on the converted scores of the experimental group.

Free descriptions: The free description task produced multiple data points for each child. It was therefore not appropriate to perform statistical analyses, (e.g., chi square) on the resulting contingency tables. Instead, the raw scores were converted to percentages. Comparisons between groups concentrated on sex-typed and developmental differences in amount, content, and evaluation of the data. A "rule of thumb" held that intervals of ten or more percentage points constituted notable findings.

The data were analyzed by sex, age, and preferred status of characters (positive, neutral, negative) both for overall trends and for patterns based on children's evaluations of individual characters. We looked for the following information: content and depth of descriptions (major categories and subcategories): "tone" of the free descriptions (evaluation): summative descriptions (most important content and evaluation): and reasons for stated preferences. Finally, an analysis of variance gauged the significance of differences in amount of descriptors across preferred status by age and sex of respondent.

Results

Patterns of Identification

Four television programs* provided the children with a pool of 24 characters from which to select their three pairs of positive, neutral and negative identificands. A majority of the children (83.7%) chose to discuss people from Happy Days (47.5%) and the Brady Bunch (36.2%), two family-oriented situation comedies. This concentration is an indication that these shows and their characters were highly familiar to our subjects.

There was a predictable tendency for the children to prefer younger, same sex characters. Such selection based on similarity between character and child parallels Maccoby and Wilson's (1959) findings. This is not surprising since we modeled our definition of preference or "identification" after theirs, so that "the [child] viewer, in fantasy, [puts] himself in the place of the character." Conversely, both boys and girls were likely to give opposite sex characters least-preferred status. The neutral characters were represented by a random mixture of male, female, older and younger characters. Table II displays the patterns of selection by same and opposite sex character. The only notable sex difference is in the girls' greater willingness to identify with male characters, a finding also supported by past research (Miller, 1976; Reeves, 1976).

Table II

Selection of Characters for Preferred, Neutral and Non-preferred Status by Sex of Respondent (Expressed in percent of total selections)

Status	preferred (+)		neutral (N)		negative (−)	
Sex of Character	same	opp.	same	opp.	same	opp.
Respondent G	32.2	1.3	13.3	19.3	6.4	27.5
B	28.1	5.7	13.9	18.1	5.7	28.5

*The Brady Bunch, Eight is Enough, Happy Days, Mork and Mindy

Reasons for Preferences

The reasons given most often for character preferences were: Level I, gender (e.g., "He's a boy, I wouldn't want to be a boy.") and appearance ("She's pretty."); Level II individual behaviors (e.g., "She cleans the house," "He always hits the jukebox."); and Level III personality traits and social competencies ("He's always grouchy," "She's popular.").

Table III
Reasons for Preferences in Percentage of Responses
(by category, age and sex of respondent and preferred status of character)

Char. Status	Grade	Sex	Ia Gender Appearance	IIa Individual Behaviors	IIId Personality Social Competency
+	2	G	43.9	--	22.0
		B	19.4	16.1	29.0
	5	G	28.9	--	36.8
		B	--	--	35.3
-	2	G	59.5	24.3	--
		B	53.3	--	20.0
	5	G	19.4	--	30.6
		B	38.7	22.6	--

When the younger girls gave Level I reasons for wanting to trade places with preferred televesion people, they were usually referring to the characters' attractiveness. Level I responses to why both boys and girls would not want to be the non-preferred characters most often took the form of a disclaimer based on gender differences (e.g., "She's a girl. I can't be a girl.") The children gave Level III reasons for preferred characters more often than they did for non-preferred . In addition, the developmental pattern seen in the overall data is reflected here, with fifth graders referring to internal traits 10% more often than the second graders.

Evaluation

The data from both the dilemma and the free description tasks indicated the degree to which the children's stated preferences carried over to their descriptions of the characters. We predicted that there would be a positive correspondence between status and evaluation (e.g., a child's preferred characters would be accorded a positive description and dilemma resolution, while a child's non-preferred characters would be negatively judged in each task).

Dilemmas. An analysis of variance performed on scores from the dilemma task revealed a significant difference between the age groups: the younger children tended to be more negative and the older children more positive in their interpretations of the characters' actions in the story contexts ($F = 9.084$, $p = .004$).

The scores in Table IV show relative differences on a scale from -1.0 to 1.0. Therefore, the second and fifth graders' responses are clustered around the neutral mean. While the younger respondents are more negative in their comments, they are still not extreme in their judgements. The lowest score was -.327 for the second graders' non-preferred characters. Since the fifth graders discussed many of the same television people, we speculate that the younger children's feelings for these largely opposite sex characters were more truly negative than those of the older children. The fifth graders; (especially the girls) did not identify with the teen-aged characters, but they found them attractive or interesting enough to be evaluated relatively more positively.

Although the four preselected shows provided the children with a range of types from which to choose, it by no means constituted an exhaustive selection. In order to get a sense of how children's tastes in television people might vary, we asked the baseline group, who did not engage in the free description task, to tell us who their favorite television characters were.

This open-ended condition resulted in almost as many characters as there were children. Nevertheless, several respondents talked about people from the four preselected situation comedies; the largest subgroup of characters were also from this genre (Situation Comedies 42.5%; Cartoons 30.0%; Other 18.5%). While the boys were very careful to choose same sex characters, the girls in the baseline group showed an even greater tendency to stray from sex-typed preferences than those in the experimental condition. The second grade girls chose to trade places with males 63.3% of the time; the fifth grade girls, 33.3%.

Table IV

Average Scores for
Television Dilemmas
(Range of Scores -1.0 to 1.0)

		Preferred Status of Characters			Average for
		-	N	+	All Characters
Grade	2	-.327	-.072	-.081	-.160
	5	.082	.253	.052	.129

The influence of the children's preferences on the evaluation scores for the dilemmas approached significance ($F = 2.006$, $p = .0530$). In other words, the non-preferred characters evoked relatively more negative interpretations in the story contexts than the positive and neutral characters.

Curiously, the neutral characters were evaluated slightly more positively than the preferred characters. Perhaps the characters for whom the children had neither strongly negative nor strongly positive feelings were different from those the respondents chose as preferred characters. The issue of complexity will be discussed when we compare specific characters across preference.

Free descriptions. The results from the evaluation of free descriptions parallel those of the dilemma task. In general, it was children's tendency to emphasize the neutral or purely descriptive aspects of the television characters. Again, we find that the older children were more positive than younger children, this time in their verbal descriptions of television characters.

Table V
Evaluation of Responses to Free Description Task
(Percentage of Positive, Neutral and Negative Descriptions)

		Negative	Neutral	Positive
Grade	2	12.0	70.3	18.2
	5	11.0	64.1	25.9

The children were asked to sum up the characters by their most important attributes. The evaluative content of these responses shows more range than the longer descriptions. For example, the number of positive comments increases two-fold for the preferred and neutral characters, though not for the non-preferred characters. This exaggeration of the positive skew may be an indication that, as a parting comment, the children felt that they ought to say something "nice" about the characters. It could also reflect a general belief that television characters on situation comedies are basically good people who merit a positive evaluation.

Table VI
Evaluation of Free Descriptions compared with
"Most Important" Descriptions (in parentheses)

		Negative	Neutral	Positive
Preferred Status of Character	-	12.4 (6.5)	64.1 (55.0)	22.7 (38.5)
	N	10.4 (5.8)	66.1 (47.0)	23.9 (47.8)
	+	8.9 (9.5)	65.7 (48.5)	26.1 (49.0)

If we examine the children's descriptions of the eight most frequently chosen characters, we find: 1) the older girls tended to use a greater proportion of positive descriptors for preferred television people than the other children did (37.5% vs. 19.9); 2) the younger boys were the most critical of the non-preferred characters (in their case, the teenaged girls) 25.2% vs. 11.4%; and 3) the fifth grade girls were more positive than the other children about the non-preferred characters (including the teenaged boys, 28.4% vs. 16.9%).

The fifth grade girls may have been reflecting a greater involvement in their television viewing. They liked the teenaged girls, who represent models for their approaching adolescence; and they think highly of the younger male characters -- models for future attachments, perhaps. As with the dilemmas, the younger boys are adamant in their criticisms of their non-preferred characters. This is not surprising given the well-documented sex-segregation which occurs in the early school years (Maccoby, 1980).

Categorization of Descriptions[1]

There is a predictable developmental increase in the use of Level III (internal) descriptors. This increase is even more exaggerated among the "most important" attributes.

The responses also vary by the sex of the children. The younger girls focused on Level I labels and Level II actions; young boys emphasized actions; older girls, Level I descriptions and Level III internal attributes; and older boys stressed all three levels of surface, active and internal.

Table VI
Percentage of Descriptions by Major Category, Grade, and Sex of Respondent (Most important in parenthesis)

Grade	Sex	Surface I	Active II	Internal III
2	G	.385(.496)	.359(.132)	.256(.372)
	B	.322(.432)	.478(.270)	.210(.299)
5	G	.354(.268)	.292(.152)	.354(.580)
	B	.339(.411)	.346(.062)	.315(.527)

1. The reader is referred to the summary chart of categories and examples on pages 10-11.

The subcategories which received the most emphasis were social locators (I D) (.g., friends, relatives, relationships); social behaviors (II B) (e.g., actions relating the character to others); personality traits and social competencies (III D) (e.g., kindness, popularity); and thoughts and feelings about others (III E). These findings are summed up in an analysis which looked at the degree to which children mentioned characters' relationships and social actions.

Table VII
Percentage of Social and Individual Attributes by Grade of Respondent

		Social Attributes	vs.	Individual Attributes
Grade	2	80.4		19.6
	5	79.9		25.6

It is obvious that the genre of television program can dictate, to a certain extent, the parameters of its characters' behaviors and traits. Happy Days and The Brady Bunch are family-based series whose stories are built upon the relationships among the regular characters. Children would be more likely to mention socially-oriented characteristics for the people on these programs than they would the stars of police dramas in which actions and plot are generally more important than character development. Yet it is interesting that such a preponderance of comments are social in nature.

The table on the following page presents free description data organized by age, sex, and preference choice. Overall, we see sex-typed differences in the use of certain levels of descriptors, as well as a developmental change in awareness of abstract characteristics.

Table VIII

Percent of free description data falling into major categories by grade and sex of respondent and character status

Status	Grade	Sex	I Surface	II Active	III Internal
−	2	G	37.9	36.7	25.4
		B	24.6	52.2	23.1
	5	G	34.6	29.1	36.8
		B	36.0	34.4	29.6
N	2	G	36.0	44.4	19.7
		B	23.0	51.6	25.4
	5	G	35.9	31.2	32.9
		B	34.9	31.4	33.7
+	2	G	42.0	26.0	32.0
		B	42.2	41.6	16.2
	5	G	35.7	27.4	36.9
		B	31.0	37.5	31.5

Over half of the younger boys' observations about the preferred and neutral characters concerned these people's behaviors (e.g., If Fonzie hits the jukebox, it goes on; Alice cleans the house). The second grade girls talked about behaviors and superficial features, labels and locators (e.g., Marsha's fourteen years old; Howard has a star part on Happy Days; Chachi is Fonzie's cousin). The younger boys' least favortie people were characterized in similar fashion with surface and active descriptions. The younger girls differed from their male age-mates in their use of internal descriptors for non-preferred characters. Most of these comments were made about male characters (i.e., Howard, Chachi, and Greg). It is quite possible their interest in the slightly older males leads them to seek more information, thus plumbing deeper levels of the characters' personalities and motivation (e.g., Greg likes to go out with girls; Chachi tries to copy Fonzie, to get all the girls).

The older boys observations were evenly divided across categories for all three levels of preference. They maintain a slightly greater emphasis on the

actions of the (predominantly female) non-preferred characters (e.g., Marion always talks a lot; Marsha goes to dancing school; Joanie used to smoke). The fifth grade girls were higher than the other three groups of respondants in their attention to internal attributes of the preferred and non-preferred characters. (e.g., Fonz's supposed to be tough and cool; Howard's not that nice; Marsha is real good to her sisters; Joanie wants to grow up faster than she really is.) Compared to the boys, the girls continued to deemphasize actions.

The sex differences which show boys emphasizing action and girls focusing on appearance and personality, parallel other findings both in television research and in the person perception literature (e.g., Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Reeves, 1978). They are discussed later in the context of specific characters.

The table below summarizes the analysis of the children's descriptions by both Level and evaluation:

Table IX

Evaluation of responses to free description task by major category

Level / Evaluation	I	II	III
Negative	2.6	14.9	15.9
Neutral	91.8	69.1	34.1
Positive	5.6	16.0	50.1

50% of all higher level descriptors (e.g., inferred traits or feeling states) were also positive, while the surface and active categories of attributes were predominantly neutral. To a certain degree, this correspondence right be attributable to the fact the older girls used more positive and more internal descriptors than the other children. When the Level III data is examined by separate groups, however, all of the children's internal descriptions tend to be positive. This may be another reflection of the basic good nature of this

collection of television characters. For example, a viewer may not care for Fonz's mannerisms or his line of work, but they admit he is a good person who cares for his friends and family. The one exception to the pattern described above is found in the second grade boys who had 14% more negative Level III remarks about non-preferred (i.e., female) characters than any other group interviewed (35% vs. 8.9, 21.2, 21.4), further emphasizing the strength of the younger boy's rejections to these characters.

Amount of Information

A 2(grade) x 2(sex) x 3(character status) analysis of variance resulted in a significant sex x character status interaction ($F = 4.286$, $p = .016$).

Table X

Average number of attributes per description by sex of respondent and character status

	- Non-preferred	N Neutral	+ Preferred	Total
Girls	4.51	4.71	4.38	4.35
Boys	5.20	4.67	5.59	5.15

Boys had more to say about their preferred and non-preferred characters with the widest margin between boys' and girls' comments about positive identificands. The reason for this sex difference may relate to the fact that the boys and girls emphasized different content (surface, active, internal) categories in their descriptions. These categories, in turn, may generate variable amounts of information.

Ignoring age differences for the moment, the girls used all three major categories to describe their preferred characters, with the strongest emphasis on Level I labels and locators. The boys focused on the characters' (Level II) actions, with subordinate attention to labels and locators. The girls continued to find static Level I descriptors more salient but listed their negative identificands' internal traits as well.

Each television episode provides children with numerous examples of character behaviors. Therefore, these actions constitute a far larger set of possible descriptions than labels or locators, that remain essentially constant from week to week. In addition, we steered the children away from listing minute physical descriptions (e.g., hair color, height) by using the photographs and by telling the children we had seen the shows once or twice before and were familiar with the characters' appearances.

The higher number of responses among the boys, along with the type of descriptions offered (i.e., action) would seem to suggest that they talk more about their preferred and non-preferred characters than girls do. However, boys greater quantity of information should not be interpreted as evidence that they know more. Boys reliance on action (Level II) seems to imply less attention to who the characters are, and more to what they do. The girls, on the other hand, are concerned with the complete picture of the character's appearance, behavior, personality and motivation, implying a greater range of information processing.

Furthermore, in the case of the internal descriptors, it is possible to embed several lower level comments into a Level III attribute. For example, a child might say that Howard Cunningham is Joanie's father (Level I); that he always tells her to go to her room (Level II); and that he comes in when she and her boyfriend are on the couch (Level II). Another child could summarize the same information by saying that Howard is Joanie's overprotective father (Level III).

Analysis of responses to individual characters

As the comments of the four subgroups are compared across the major content categories for the preferred, neutral and non-preferred characters, it becomes important to ask who these characters are. For example, the boys' favorite

characters differ markedly in their attributes and activities from those preferred by the girls. Therefore, in this analysis, we will hold individual characters constant to look at the effect of the children's positive, neutral and negative preferences on their descriptions and evaluations of the television people. The eight most frequently chosen characters provided sufficient data to indicate developmental and gender-based trends. These characters are described in the appendix with the pattern of choice by character preference.

As in the overall data, the boys and girls were careful to select same-sex and similar age characters as their preferred choices. They tended to pick opposite sex characters as non-preferred, with the exception of the girls' rejection of Alice, the maid, and the older boys' disaffection with Fonz. Neutral characters are less easily categorized with a mixture of male and female, old and young.

Developmental effects for six characters

The analysis of the aggregated data reveals a tendency for the older children to use more internal attributes in their descriptions of the characters. This finding holds up for six of the eight characters, but only when they are described as preferred or non-preferred characters. When they are chosen as neutral characters there is no developmental increase in the use of internal descriptors.

Table XI below illustrates this finding by displaying the percentage difference between the second and fifth graders' use of the third (internal) category for preferred, opposite-sex, and neutral (mixed) characters.

Table XI

Developmental change in Level III descriptors (in percentages)

Name	Preferred (same sex)	Non-preferred (opposite sex)	Neutral (mixed)
Fonz	12.4	28.0	0
Greg	19.0	12.2	5.3

Table XI (cont.)

Name	Preferred (same sex)	Non-preferred (opposite sex)	Neutral (mixed)
Chachi	19.6	2.9	-3.7
Howard	(NA)	15.5	-5.6
Alice	15.3	18.9	-8.4
Marion	(NA)	6.7	-4.7

Taking Greg as an example, when girls chose him as a non-preferred character, their free descriptions fell into the three major categories in the following configuration:

Greg Brady		Surface I	Active II	Internal III
Girls	2	53.8	23.1	23.1
	5	58.8	5.9	35.3

Thus, the older girls used internal descriptors 12.2% more often than the younger girls. Older boys noted Greg's internal attributes 19.0% more often than younger boys did.

Greg Brady		Surface I	Active II	Internal III
Boys	2	40.8	48.7	10.5
	5	21.3	49.2	29.5

Effect of limited characterizations

The data for the two teenaged females do not conform to the pattern described above. There is either very little developmental change (+.5) or a strong negative trend (-14.6) in the use of the internal traits. The female teenagers are often characterized by their limited personality development and level of activity. As a result, the children seem to have "learned" the inner workings of these characters by second grade. Perhaps there is no deeper level for the more sophisticated viewer to explore. To borrow from Salomon, these are "easy characters." They require little AIME and therefore inspire less interpretation than other more complex characters.

A similar pattern occurs when same sex television people were selected as non-preferred characters. There were decreases in the use of the third category among the older respondents.

Table XII

Developmental changes in Level III descriptors
for teenaged girls and same sex non-preferred characters

Name	Preferred (same sex)	Non-preferred (opposite sex)	Neutral (mixed)
Joanie	.5	-2.7	(NA)
Marsha	-14.6	.4	(NA)
		(same sex)	
Marion		-21.0	
Alice		-2.2	
Howard		-3.8 (small n)	

As noted above characters were often chosen as non-preferred because they were of the opposite sex. This rejection by gender was particularly true of the second graders who, when asked why they would not trade places with someone, would state, "I don't want to be a boy!" or "She's a girl!!" The same sex television people, by contrast, are more likely to have been rejected for character specific reasons. When children evaluated many of the older, same sex characters, they may have found their roles and responsibilities disagreeable. For example, the free description data shows the girls commented on Alice and Marion's typical behaviors (e.g., cooking, cleaning) 53.8% of the time. The children's stated reasons for not identifying with these characters also centered on these undervalued behaviors. Perhaps the children's feelings about rejected same-sex characters are more consistently negative than their feelings for non-preferred opposite sex characters whom they may either like or dislike.

Summary of Hypotheses and Findings

I. Evaluation: Character status (preferred, neutral, non-preferred) will correspond positively to dilemma scores and evaluation of free descriptions (e.g., the preferred characters' action in the dilemmas will be interpreted favorably and evaluated positively in the free descriptions).

The children's scores on the dilemma task and the evaluation of their free descriptions were predominantly neutral. Hence, there was no correspondence between status and evaluation. Two reasons for this overall neutrality may be methodological. First, we did not want to bias the children's evaluations of the character by asking them directly what they did or did not like about the characters. As a consequence, the children were perhaps not as candid about their feelings as they might have been had we worded the task differently. Also, since we wanted to look at length of description, we did not probe the children's answers to find out what they meant by their statements. In categorizing responses we felt obliged to be somewhat conservative to avoid reading negative and positive affect into responses.

Second, we limited the list of television people in order to compare descriptions of individual characters across preferred status, and to control for amount of viewing time by comparing children's preferences within shows. However, restricting the children's choices may also have reduced the correspondence between their stated preferences and their actual level of involvement. Thus, instead of choosing people they would really like to be, many of the children may have settled for the best possible alternative among those presented. Consequently, we question whether the children necessarily always liked the preferred characters and disliked the nonpreferred ones. The primary rationale for acceptance or rejection may have been gender-based. To illustrate, several of the boys said that Marion was a caring person, but that they still would not want to be her since she was a "girl." Likewise, several girls expressed affection for their

(young, male) negative identificands, but found ludicrous the thought of trading places with them.

Even though our primary predictions were not confirmed, there was a significant difference between the second and fifth graders in their interpretations of the characters' actions in the hypothetical story context. The younger children were relatively more critical of all the characters, particularly the non-preferred ones, while the older children, (especially the girls), were more positive. Perhaps, in the case of the girls, this is a manifestation of their greater tendency to be "prosocial" (Maccoby, 1980) in their comments about others. Perhaps it was partly experimenter effect: the children were more inclined to be positive with the strangers who came to interview them. Or, as discussed above, the girls may be more affectively involved in these family shows; they may find the characters more engaging and thus feel more positive about them.

Level of content and evaluation

The three content categories were notably different in the way the descriptions at the surface, active, and internal level were evaluated. 91.8% of the Level I labels and locators were non-evaluative descriptions. Level II behaviors and activities were still neutral, though less dramatically so (69.1%) with the balance of the descriptions being almost equally positive and negative. The third category deviated the most severely, with 50% of the evaluations being positive. As seen in Table XV, this skewed pattern appears consistently when the data are broken down by age and sex of respondent and by character status. The one exception is the younger boys tendency to be equally positive and negative in their inferences about non-preferred characters (e.g., Joanie and Marsha).

An explanation of this phenomenon must include a consideration of the nature of the characters being described. First of all, none of the characters the children discussed was a "bad guy." While viewers may not like a person's status or behaviors, deeper analysis of personality and motivation usually exposes these

to be good people underneath. As noted above, the children were quick to reject certain characters for gender-based or occupational reasons, but were equally to describe them as being "nice people."[1]

Second, once children reach the stage where they can "read" characters at a deeper level, they are less inclined to judge them solely on their appearance and actions. And since all of the characters are basically "good" the children's evaluations of the characters remain positive or neutral.

II. Content: Preferred character status will correspond with increased use of internal (Level III) descriptors while neutral and non-preferred status will correspond with decreased use of internal descriptors.

While the data followed predicatble sex- and age-based patterns, there was no clear relationship between preferred status of character and the content of the children's descriptions for the aggregated data. In general, the children showed a developmental increase in their ability to discuss internal traits, with boys and girls focusing on different features (boys: action; girls: appearance and personality).

Reeves (1979) too, found sex differences in the attributes children settle upon to justify their choice of role models. He holds that boys find strength most salient; while girls focus on attractiveness. Since we had no action-adventure heroes in the study, it was unlikely children would differentiate characters on the attribute of strength. However, the boys' use of Level II descriptors implies a similar concern for physical activities and abilities. The girls' surface and internal descriptions included references to character's physical beauty as well as personality variables that might come under the heading of attractiveness.

1. It is interesting to reflect that truly evil characters never appear on television shows. In action-adventure series, new villains are introduced weekly for the hero to vanquish or rehabilitate. The bad characters introduced on lighter fare usually turn out to be misguided or misunderstood people who are straightened out (in a half hour's time) by the shows' main characters.

However, none of the features in Reeves' analysis suggests the developmental increase we and other researchers have found (e.g. Wartella and Alexander, 1977).

In examining the aggregated data, important aspects of the individual characters are lost. Thus, the eight most frequently chosen characters allow for individual analysis across preference. Three major findings emerged from these comparisons:

1) For six of the eight characters, status as preferred or non-preferred permitted expected developmental increases in attention to derived or internal attributes. However, the children's indifference to these same characters resulted in no change or a decrease in the proportion of Level III descriptors used;

2) Underdeveloped characters evoked no increase in level of interpretation, regardless of status;

3) Same sex, non-preferred characters discouraged deeper processing, perhaps because of the salience of their undervalued activities (e.g., routine work, family responsibilities).

These three trends are based on a limited range of character types but they are strong indicators of the kind of complexity involved in children's processing of the social information provided them by television characters. It is not possible to determine the effect of Character A on a child without asking: 1) Who is the character? Is this person typified by his or her appearance, actions or interpersonal skills? Is the character complex and true to life or shallow and stereotyped? Is the character's role central or peripheral to the weekly plot development? 2) Who is the child? Is he or she older or younger, male or female, uncritical or television literate? 3) What are the child's feelings about the character? How interesting or difficult does the child perceive the character to be? How much mental effort does the child need or choose to invest in viewing this character? How deep is the child's resulting level of processing? What has he or she learned from the character? The study of children's character understanding must reflect social cognitive development as well as individual differences among both characters and viewers (Isler, 1981).

Conclusion

Children identify with television characters who possess qualities they admire (e.g., attractiveness, physical ability) and who are perceived by the young viewers as being in some way similar to them (Fernie, 1981). Of importance is the idea that identification may influence children's conceptions of desirable social attributes and behaviors. Such learning depends, of course upon developmental factors as well as the values the child may be getting from other sources. As children mature, they learn to limit their fantasies to sex- or age-appropriate characterizations. This means that their fantasies may also be limited by the degree to which their favorite same-sex characters are developed in the context of the weekly series. Likewise, as children grow in their ability to discern subtleties of intent and motivation, it is possible that the television people they come to admire provide them little opportunity to apply these emerging cognitive skills.

Returning to Salomon's model of AIME, involvement with favorite television characters may result in increased mental effort. This heightened awareness in turn affects the amount and quality of information gained from these television models. A question for future research is: does this character knowledge affect how children see themselves and does it influence their own personal and occupational goals? If so, television producers and programmers have a responsibility to provide child viewers with a wide range of engaging, multifaceted characters. In addition, parents and teachers need to be aware of whom children are watching, to discuss the ways characters are developed on television, and to help children see limited television people for the stereotypes that they are.

Appendix

Eight characters most frequently chosen

Show	Character	Description
Happy Days	Joanie	teenaged daughter/high school student
	Marion	mother/housewife
	Howard	father/proprietor of store
	Fonz	aging dropout/auto mechanic
	Chachi	Joanie's boyfirend/Fonz's cousin
Brady Bunch	Marsha	teenager/oldest sister
	Greg	teenager/oldest brother
	Alice	middleaged housekeeper for Bradys

Status of individual characters

		+ Preferred	N Neutral	- Non-preferred
Girls	2	Joanie, Marsha	Alice, Chachi, Greg	Howard, Greg, Chachi Alice
	5	Joanie, Marsha	Chachi, Marion	Howard, Alice, Greg, Fonz
	2	Greg, Fonz, Chachi	Howard, Alice	Joanie, Marsha, Marion
	5	Greg, Chachi, Fonz	Howard, Marion	Marion, Joanie, Marsha, Fonz, Alice

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Harvard Project Zero is a basic research program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its original charge was to study creation and comprehension in the arts and means toward better art education. A prime objective throughout the Project's history has been to provide a sound theoretical and experimental base for effective education of artists and audiences. The Project began in the fall of 1967 in response to the frank admission that, however much is known about how to educate in science and how to evaluate scientific work, practically nothing is known about the underlying principles of how to teach and evaluate in art. From that challenging "zero" the Project took its name and tasks. Our research methods include rigorous conceptual analysis, investigation of relevant literature, design and execution of key experiments in psychology and other fields, visits to arts education institutions, and application of results to proposing and assessing programs in art education.

Project founder and former director Nelson Goodman's book Languages of Art (Bobbs-Merrill, 1968) has provided important direction in our effort to isolate and investigate basic skills. This work sets forth a "theory of symbols," a broad treatment of elements of communication, embracing words, gestures, diagrams, paintings, poems, musical scores, and so on. Almost all the psychological processes under consideration in our studies of the arts involve extensive operation with and upon symbols of various kinds. These symbols are not merely instruments of communication, but also instruments of cognition, tools in terms of which the mind deals with the perceptual world.

Some of our research has examined the psychological implications of the theoretical models of symbol systems introduced in Languages of Art. For instance, one question is whether different information processing skills are necessary to produce effective art within linguistic, versus nonlinguistic, symbol systems. Another, complementary approach emphasizes problem solving and search strategies in the moment-to-moment perception and production of a work of art. How do subjects search for rhyme words in poetry or explore alternative placements of pieces in collage? A favorite means of developing and testing new models is through the study of errors. By using impoverished or ambiguous stimuli, assigning tasks somewhat too difficult for a subject, or working with brain-damaged subjects, one can elicit patterns of error-making which suggest hypotheses and select between alternative models of a process. These approaches characterize many of the Project's investigations mentioned below in a list of Project members and their particular interests.

Though the development of actual curricula in arts education is not a primary concern, the Project does contribute to the field of practical education. Project members have responded to inquiries and requests to comment on curricula from teachers in the field. Establishment of Harvard Summer School's Institute in Arts Administration resulted from the Project's reply to an inquiry from the director of the Harvard Summer School, and members of the Project staff cooperated in planning the Institute, in preparing material, and in the actual teaching. Consideration consultation has been provided to schools, museums, television, and a variety of arts institutions by members of the Project.

The Project has also sponsored a series of lecture-performances in various media, designed to give the general public and prospective public school teachers and administrators better insight into and attitudes towards artists and the arts. As the series title "Art in the Making" suggests, the purpose of the lecture-demonstrations was to reveal something of the artist's way of working, rather than to display his products. In the presence of an audience free to ask questions, each artist explored alternatives, exposed some constraints of his medium, compared his various efforts, and searched for the right effect, choice by choice.

While maintaining a major concern with the arts and art education, the Project, under its current co-directors, has considerably broadened its field of inquiry and now investigates a whole range of topics in the area of cognitive psychology. One part of the Project has focussed particularly on developmental studies. Among the topics currently being investigated are the emergence of symbolic capacities during the first years of life; the development of literary abilities, specifically the capacity to produce and appreciate metaphors and stories; children's understandings of the various worlds presented on television; the emergence of drawing skills; and the breakdown of various symbol using capacities under various forms of brain damage. The other part of the Project has concentrated on studies in the areas of cognitive and perceptual psychology, ones which utilize both normal adult subjects and gifted artists. Among the topics investigated recently have been critical judgment and the sources of critical disagreement in adults; the thought processes of professional and amateur poets and painters in developing works; the role of geometric principles in visual perception and picture perception particularly; reasoning about everyday matters and the logical difficulties people encounter.

A list of recent papers which can be purchased from the Project is available upon request.